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Maximizing Retention: A Study of Binghamton University's Strong Academic Performers

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MAXIMIZING RETENTION: A STUDY OF BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY'S STRONG
ACADEMIC PERFORMERS

BY

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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Executive Summary

In order to continue as a leading public university, Binghamton University must retain students with strong academic records. In order to identify these students, the University uses an index system and identifies students with an index of 90 or above as its prospective students with the strongest academic records. In 2009, 29% of departed students had an index of 90 or above.

To assist the University in identifying causes for these strong academic performers' departure, telephone interviews were conducted with students who had an index of 90 or above and entered Binghamton University in fall 2008, fall 2009, and fall 2011 but left after their freshman year. From these interviews, this report identifies six primary findings. The first is that many students received a transfer option to another institution. Second, Binghamton University's location influenced students' decision to not only enroll but to leave. Third, the students did not find Binghamton University academically challenging. Fourth, other institutions provide better networking opportunities for students. Fifth, students chose Binghamton University for its affordable price. Finally, despite the fact that they left, all students seemed genuinely satisfied with their time spent at Binghamton University.

Based on these findings, I have made four recommendations. These recommendations are increasing communications with students who are obtaining a 3.3 GPA or above in their first semester, helping find ways to academically challenge high-performing students, improving opportunities for students who stay, and developing evaluation tools for both current students and students who have left the institution. Binghamton University as well as other institutions can use these recommendations to reduce not only the departure of academically-desired students, but all students.

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Problem Definition

Binghamton University is a mid-sized higher education institution that was established in 1946 and is located in the Town of Vestal, a small town in the Southern Tier of New York State. As one of the four research universities among 64 campuses in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, Binghamton University is recognized as “the premier public university in the Northeast” (*Fiske Guide to Colleges*, 2010). In the fall of 2011, the university had 11,787 undergraduate students enrolled, including 2,429 freshman, and 3,108 graduate students were enrolled (Binghamton University, 2011).

Over the last decade, Binghamton University has positioned itself as a leading public university and seeks to become not only a nationally but an internationally renowned institution (Binghamton University, 2011). In order to do so, the university must continue to attract and retain students with strong academic abilities. Since a high-quality student is difficult to quantify (Meredith, 2004), Binghamton University uses an index or sliding scale system that is a mathematical computation comprised of 60% Grade Point Average (GPA) and 40% SAT Reasoning Test scores. This institution considers students with an index of 90 or above, which is a range of an 89 GPA with a 1480 SAT to a 99 GPA with a 1230 SAT, as its most-desirable prospective students (C. Brown, Special Assistant to Provost for Retention, Binghamton University, October 2011). In 2008, out of the 2,437 freshman, 24% of the students had an index of 90 or above; in 2009, of the 2,025 freshman, 34% of the students had an index of 90 or above.

Although recruiting these high-performing students is a primary focus of the admissions process, retaining those students is just as important. In the 2010-2011 academic year, Binghamton’s overall retention rate was 91% ; which is close to the retention rates of

universities such as Cornell at 96%, Pennsylvania State at 92% and University of California at Berkeley at 97%. In any given year, the University's retention rate fluctuates between 90% and 93%. In 2009, 7% of freshmen did not return for their second year. Of that 7%, 29% were the most academically-desired students with an index of 90 or above (C. Brown, Special Assistant to Provost for Retention, Binghamton University, October 2011). See Table 1 for a clear depiction of the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years.

Table 1: *University Enrollment & Retention of the 2008-2009 & 2009-2010 Freshman yr.*

Freshman Class Year	Total Freshman Enrolled	Percentage of students with indices of 90+	Percentage of Freshmen who Dropped out	Percentage of Freshmen Drop-outs with indices of 90+
2008-2009	2, 437	24%	10%	17%
2009-2010	2, 025	34%	7%	29%

Even though Binghamton University's strong academic performers do not appear to be leaving at a higher rate than other types of students, retaining those students plays a pivotal role in meeting expectations since the university is attempting to position itself as an elite public university. For example, the University's 2010 Strategic plan aims to sustain its excellence by "...distinguish[ing] itself as a stellar institution of higher education...with the best undergraduate programs available at any public university" (p. 2). Thus, retaining as many of its most-desired students as possible is a priority for the university. Since many

accreditation agencies use retention as a benchmarking tool in assessing the quality of an institution, an increased student satisfaction will lead to an enhanced reputation (Barefoot, 2004; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Budden et. al., 2010).

Currently, the university presumes that these top students transfer to schools that are perceived as more prestigious after they have achieved a respectable GPA from Binghamton University in their first year (C. Brown, former Special Assistant to Provost for Retention, Binghamton University, October 13, 2011). However, due to a lack of evidence, Binghamton University seeks to better understand why these strong academic performers depart from the institution (C. Brown, Special Assistant to Provost for Retention, Binghamton University, October 13, 2011).

Although scholars have frequently reported on student departure, the multitude of theories has ultimately led to confusion about the true explanation (Tinto, 1986, p. 133). Retention has increasingly been a topic of research interest but much of it revolves around minority and low socio-economic status (SES) students. Little to no research has been conducted on the retention rates of universities' strong academic performers. Ultimately, retaining these students is important not just to Binghamton University but also to public universities across the entire United States.

Research Questions

1. Why do Binghamton University's strong academic performers leave the institution?
2. How can Binghamton University better retain its strong academic performers?

Literature Review

A high percentage of freshmen do not return for their sophomore year (Barefoot, 2004; Kiser & Price, 2008; Budden et al., 2010; Tinto, 1993). Thus, retention of undergraduate students continues to be a critical topic among higher education practitioners and scholars (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2008; Kuh & Love, 2000). The issue is viewed as important not only because many benchmarking tools include it as an indicator of institutional success (Barefoot, 2004; Budden et al., 2010; Roberts & Styron, 2010), but also because many believe that increasing the number of college graduates leads to more productive and enlightened members of society (Kiser & Price, 2008; Roberts & Styron, 2010).

There are two different types of departure: institutional and system. Institutional departure happens when a student leaves an individual institution to attend another, while system departure happens when a student leaves the system of higher education altogether (Tinto, 1993). Many studies have found that the most vulnerable populations for system departures are students with low high school or first-year GPAs (Bean, 1984; Budden et al., 2010; Gross et al., 2007; Kiser & Price, 2008; Tinto, 1993). The population for this study, given their exceptional academic performance, is more likely to leave an institution rather than the entire system of higher education. Thus, understanding the major causes for institutional departure identified by past research is the focus of this literature review. Four key variables that individually or collectively influence institutional departure are distance from home, finances, institution environment, and intention to leave.

Distance from Home

The distance between a student's home town and university is a primary reason for institutional departure (Astin, 1993; Turley, 2006; Williams & Luo, 2010). Students who choose to attend college further away from home receive less family support, not only because of the distance but the differences in social, cultural, and environmental experiences they encounter (Kuh & Love, 2000; Miller, 2007; Williams & Luo, 2010). This lack of immediate support and inability to adjust can cause feelings of loneliness, discomfort, and depression, and leads students to depart from a particular institution (Eaton & Bean, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Those who are unable to adjust are thought to have never truly "'arrived' in the first place'" (Kuh & Love, 2000, p. 205).

Other researchers offer an alternative perspective; they find that it is important to have that separation from family in order to fully experience college life (Astin, 1993; Stieha, 2010). In fact, some say enrolling close to home typically increases students' responsibilities outside of school work, causing a distraction (Astin, 1993). Research also indicates that regardless of a student's academic performance, parents highly influence students' decisions about where to attend college (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Choy et al, 2000; Jensen, 1981; Kuh & Love, 2000; Miller, 2007; Stieha, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Turley, 2006, Williams & Luo, 2010) and that a parent's dependence on a student for childcare and monetary contributions highly influence a student's decision to enroll at a school close to home. Overall, researchers have found that going away for college allows a student to build new relationships with peers and faculty, easily participate in extracurricular activities, and fully engage academically (Astin, 1993; Stieha, 2010).

Finances

Not only does an institution's distance from home affect student retention, so does a student's ability to finance their education. Since the early 1990's, tuition rates in higher education have increased faster than the inflation rate and income growth in the United States (Heller, 2002; Cress & Sax, 1998). Also, state appropriations to higher education have decreased (Chen & John, 2011). Therefore, the burden of paying for school has shifted from taxpayers to individual students and their families (Chen & John, 2011), impacting student retention rates nationwide. Although the influence is moderate in comparison to other retention factors (Gross et al., 2007), the financial burden of paying for school may still have a significant impact on individual students.

Multiple studies have found that an increase in both institutional (i.e., scholarships) and non-institutional (i.e., grant aid and loans) aid improves the likelihood of student retention (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Cabrera et al., 1992; Chen & John, 2011; Gross et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993). This aid impacts students in multiple ways but most importantly it reduces their need to work outside of school, allowing more free time to participate in extracurricular activities which integrates them further into the campus culture (Astin, 1993; Gross et al., 2007; Stieha, 2010). On-campus jobs and financial aid through "work-study" programs may have a similar effect, enriching a student's experience because they feel integrated and important to the institution (Astin, 1993).

Although some literature supports finances as a major factor in institution departure, Tinto (1993) suggests that students who indicate that finances are the reason for their departure are only telling part of their story: he argues their reasons reflect multiple factors

(i.e., lack of right-fit or academic reasons) and that they do not believe the benefits of continuing outweigh the financial costs of attendance. Thus, offering financial aid is like “courtship” (Gross et al., 2007) and increases the likelihood of retaining a student from their first to second year (Chen & John, 2011; Jensen, 1981). Ultimately, a lack of financial support—either from the institution or from a familial standpoint—can be the final determinant of student retention and overall satisfaction with an institution (Astin, 1993; Cabrera et al., 1992; Jensen, 1981).

Institution Environment

In addition to an institution’s distance from a student’s hometown and financial factors, campus climate—both academically and socially—may influence student satisfaction as well. While some authors have separated the social and academic environments, many researchers find that both realms of a college experience are intertwined (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Shushuk & Sriram, 2010; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Negative experiences with the institutional environment may lead a student to believe that there is a lack of “right-fit” between them and the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Although it is beneficial for students’ social lives to include extracurricular activities such as clubs and organizations, scholars believe that students’ social connection to classroom has a stronger influence on student satisfaction (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Shushuk & Sriram, 2010; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Developing formal and informal relationships with professors, peers, and teaching assistants make students feel less like a number, and these ties often stimulate projects and intellectual

discussions outside of the classroom (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2008; Pascarella, 1980).

Compared to other students, it may actually be easier for strong academic performers to make beneficial connections due to their tendency to seek ways to be academically challenged (Eaton and Bean, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Ultimately, if the social connections that students form in the classroom are positive, the ties will build students' confidence in their own academic abilities as well as their self-assurance in making the right institution choice (Strauss & Wolkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993).

Intent to Leave

Finally, a student's intent to leave an institution is a significant factor influencing student retention (Bean, 1982; Tinto 1993). In fact, some students enter an institution with the explicit intent to depart, especially if they were not initially admitted to the institution of their choice (Tinto, 1993). Thus, a student may attend an alternate university with the intent to transfer to their first choice institution (Tinto, 1993). For these reasons, this factor is one of the hardest to overcome in higher education and nearly impossible to directly influence (Bean, 1982).

These themes suggest retention is a difficult issue to solve because it appears to be situational, based on a student's individual needs (Tinto, 1993). While there has been considerable research on student retention, there is a lack of research specifically focusing on the retention of strong academic performers. As a result, it is unclear if the reasons for these student departures are different than those of at-risk or "traditional" student departures. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Research Method

To answer my research questions, I conducted telephone interviews with students with an index of 90 or above who entered Binghamton University in fall 2008, fall 2009, and fall 2011 but left after their freshman year. Fall 2010 was not included in this sample. This method allowed me to learn about the experiences of students who have left the institution and identify any key patterns within this student population. Since this study involves working with human subjects, Binghamton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) needed to approve the study. The confirmation letter from the IRB can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data for this study from March 14, 2012 through March 23, 2012. The Office of Institutional Research at Binghamton University provided me with the names and valid emails of 90 departed students. An initial email requesting their participation was sent to the subjects. This email can be found in Appendix B. Phone interviews were conducted with twelve students.

Before any interview questions were asked, participants were informed that any information they provided would be kept confidential and would not be able to be traced to their name. Since these interviews were not face-to-face, oral consent was given in place of a written consent form. The typical written consent form was waived by the IRB due to the nature of this study. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of five main questions with seven sub-questions as well as three demographic questions. I sought to understand what made the student initially choose Binghamton University as well as why

they chose to leave the university. The interviews lasted for 10 to 25 minutes. Results from the interviews were coded and themes were identified. The interview script and questions can be found in Appendix C.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, all names were replaced with a coded number known only to me. Also, all responses and any identifying information were stored on a password protected computer. Finally, all identifying information was destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Limitations

The small number of interviewees, 12 out of 90, makes it difficult to apply the findings to the entire population of students who left Binghamton University in the fall of 2008, 2009, or 2011. In addition, I was unable to contact all of the departed students with an index of 90 or above that entered in fall 2008, fall 2009, and fall 2011 because ten students no longer had valid email addresses. Finally, the students entering during these three years may have experienced extenuating circumstances that students from other years did not experience, thus making it difficult to conclude that the factors influencing student departure identified in this study apply to all students with an index of 90 or above who have attended Binghamton University during a different time period.

Strengths

The strength of doing phone interviews is that it provided a firsthand look at what an individual experienced in their first year at Binghamton University. It also allowed me to find out where the students with an index of 90 or above have transferred to as well as their reasons for choosing that institution. In addition, the interviews allowed me to obtain in-

depth information that a survey or secondary data analysis could not provide me. Finally, it gave students an opportunity to have an exit interview.

Findings

After identifying recurrent themes among student responses, six main findings emerged from the data. A table displaying general information about student respondents can be found in Appendix D and a list of themes accompanied by interviewee quotes can be found in Appendix E. The findings of this study include:

1. Many students entered Binghamton with a transfer option to another institution after completion of their freshman year;
2. Binghamton University's location influenced students' decisions to not only enroll but to leave;
3. The students did not find Binghamton University academically challenging;
4. Other institutions provide better networking opportunities for students;
5. Students chose Binghamton University for its affordable price;
6. Despite the fact that they left, all students seemed genuinely satisfied with their time spent at Binghamton University.

Finding #1: Many students entered Binghamton with a transfer option to another institution after completion of their freshman year.

Of the twelve interviewees, six were accepted as a transfer student to another institution (Cornell University refers to this as a “transfer option”) contingent on their academic performance during their freshman year. As indicated in table 2, of those six, five received the “transfer option” from Cornell University. The remaining student received a similar opportunity to transfer to SUNY Geneseo. All six students were informed of this opportunity prior to attending Binghamton University. Below, in table 2, is a description of

the students who had received a “transfer option,” including the institutions providing the offers as well as information on student gender, race, and major course of study.

Table 2: *Characteristics of the students who received a transfer option.*

	Number Respondents
Transfer Institution	
Cornell University	5
SUNY Geneseo	1
Gender	
Male	3
Female	3
Race	
White	5
Asian	1
Major Course of Study	
Biology & Society	1
Industrial & Labor Relations	4
Speech Pathology	1

This finding is consistent with work by Tinto (1993) which argues that some students enter an institution with the explicit intent to leave, especially if they were not initially accepted into the institution of their choice. It also supports Cheryl Brown’s (former Special Assistant to Provost for Retention, Binghamton University) prediction of why students leave Binghamton University noted in the problem statement. One transfer student’s comments are representative:

“I was 85% positive the second I stepped foot on Binghamton’s campus that I was going to be leaving because I was already accepted to Cornell the next year...I actually had a really interesting relationship with a girl that lived across the hall from me...Her first choice was Cornell and she didn’t get accepted, not even a guaranteed

transfer. I actually ended up convincing her to re-apply to Cornell. She came with me that next fall. We're still really good friends now."

Two students who took these "transfer options" indicated that they chose Binghamton University for their freshman year because it was reputable and affordable. One student stated that "BU plays as a good stepping stone to Cornell academically."

Finding #2: Binghamton University's location influenced students' decisions to not only enroll but also to leave the institution.

Consistent with literature (Astin, 1993; Turley, 2006; Williams & Luo, 2010), many students' hometown impacted their decision on where to attend college. All twelve respondents were New York State residents and five students explicitly indicated that they chose Binghamton University because it was close to their hometown. Also, consistent with the literature (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Choy et al, 2000; Jensen, 1981; Kuh & Love, 2000; Miller, 2007; Stieha, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Turley, 2006, Williams & Luo, 2010), three of the five students who mentioned that location played a role in their decision also indicated that their family influenced their decision to stay close to home for college. For example, one student said, "I'm from Syracuse; my parents wanted me to stay within an hour radius for at least my first year of college." However, one student indicated that Binghamton University's distance from her hometown actually caused her to leave. This was clear when she stated that, "I am from Buffalo and the 5.5 hour drive to and from Binghamton was a lot. The distance I was from home made the size of the campus feel much bigger. Geneseo is only a 1.5 hour drive for me now, which I like."

In addition to the evidence that an institution's distance from a student's hometown influences decisions, a new twist to the location of the college campus emerged that was not described in the literature; for many, the location of Binghamton University played a strategic role in attending and leaving the institution. Because of Binghamton University's close proximity to Cornell University, some students indicated that they chose to attend Binghamton University for their first year. One student said "I chose BU over other schools I was accepted into simply because it was close to Cornell and I planned to transfer there anyway." Another participant stated "Binghamton was close to my hometown, Poughkeepsie, NY. However, BU played as a good stepping stone to Cornell for me; maybe the local environment prepares people for Cornell—there was an ease of transferring."

Finding #3: The students did not find Binghamton University academically challenging.

Although five of the interviewees mentioned that they attended Binghamton University for its strong academic reputation, six interviewees also indicated that they did not find Binghamton University to be academically challenging once they arrived. One student described this when she said "I felt very unfulfilled in my classes. There were definite moments where I felt that I wish this class discussion was more engaged." Another student said, "I feel I was a little more intellectually vivacious than my classmates. The professors were teaching, what I considered rudimentary vocabulary for most of the class periods." Demaris & Kritsonis (2008) and Pasarella (1980) argue that when students make formal or informal relationships with professors, teaching assistants, and peers, they feel less like a number. In the group of students I interviewed, six students directly stated that they did not try as hard to make as many formal or informal relationships at Binghamton University as they did at their current institution. One interviewee indicated that "professors didn't seem

genuinely interested in the students or that they were passionate about their field. I didn't try to speak with them or go to them for help outside of class," causing a lack of relationship building. This indicates that, for some, Binghamton University did not feed their hunger for learning and that it simply was not rigorous enough.

Finding #4: Students felt that their current institution provides better networking opportunities.

When asked what their current institution offered that Binghamton University did not, students identified networking as being an important trait. Compared to other institutions, four interviewees mentioned that Binghamton University did not do a good job of connecting current students with alumni or providing opportunities to meet with professionals in their respective field of study. For example, one student stated that:

"My school, School of Labor Relations, has a really strong alumni network. I have a first name basis with people of ages 50-70 that have been incredible mentors for me in my professional life. Maybe BU could connect freshman to alumni. Maybe have them come into the Scholars Program and talk about the great things you can do."

Another student said:

"[NYU Stern] is ranked two or three among business schools. They have good networking. Interviews for jobs are actually done on campus. At BU I had gone to the career fairs and they were only done in months of recruiting or during certain times. At NYU the [firm] presence is always there."

This finding is also consistent with the literature (Astin, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Shushok & Sriram, 2010; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993) supporting the importance of forming relationships inside and outside the classroom.

Finding #5: Students chose Binghamton University for its affordable price.

Four of the interviewees mentioned that they chose to enroll at Binghamton University for its affordable price. According to one of these students, “My Dad lost his job in 2004 and I have two older brothers who were also in college. I did not want to add any more financial burdens on my parents.” The other students simply indicated that Ivy Leagues and private institutions were incredibly expensive. Interestingly, two of the four students who blatantly identified private schools as too expensive actually ended up transferring to private institutions. These two students mentioned that after they attended a public school they felt it was worth the extra money to pay for a private institution.

Finding #6: Despite the fact that they had left Binghamton University, all students were genuinely satisfied with their time spent at Binghamton University, but wished to obtain a degree from more renowned institutions.

Although these students have left Binghamton University, all indicated that they still hold high opinions of the institution, but simply wanted to obtain degrees from universities that are viewed as more prestigious. For instance, one interviewee commented: “Binghamton is a great school but I wouldn’t have been satisfied unless I transferred to a more prestigious school.” Echoing this same sentiment, another interviewee stated, “I had my heart set on getting my degree from an Ivy League.” Not a single student holds unfavorable opinions of Binghamton University. Many students, especially those who attend Cornell, said that they

frequently visit and maintain relationships with friends they made freshman year. A student even mentioned wanting to make a financial contribution to Binghamton University one day:

“I still go back to visit every two or three months. SUNY Binghamton is a name I have come to truly respect, since I am from Syracuse [and know about the school]. I think it’s a great institution. Honestly, if I have enough money when I am older I would still donate to BU.”

Finally, many students did not see much hope for Binghamton University to change the minds of students who transfer out despite their immense respect for the institution. This was affirmed when one interviewee stated that “I don’t think there is anything that BU could have done as an institution because I am not sure with offers like m[y] [transfer option] whether or not students’ minds can be changed.”

Recommendations

Although it may seem that many of the above findings are circumstances over which administrators at Binghamton University have much influence, I believe that it is feasible to address finding #3, students not feeling academically challenged, and #4, students feeling they have few networking opportunities. I have identified four possible measures that the University can take to increase the probability of retaining the students with the strongest academic records as well as improving remaining students’ experience. These recommendations are not directed at the Undergraduate Admissions alone and are not realistic without the collaboration and cooperation of offices, departments, and individuals campus-wide. I specifically recommend that Binghamton University:

1. Increase communications with students who are obtaining a 3.3 GPA or above during their first year;
2. Find new ways to academically challenge high performing students;
3. Take measures to improve Binghamton University for students who decide to stay;
4. Develop evaluations tools for both current students and students who have left the institution.

Recommendation #1: Increase communications with students who are obtaining a 3.3 GPA or above after their first semester.

Many students receive “transfer options” to other institutions. Since most schools that offer “transfer options” require a certain GPA to remain eligible for admission, Binghamton University could increase communications with students who obtain a certain GPA during their first semester. Choosing a 3.3 GPA as the indicator makes sense because it is Cornell’s required GPA to remain in consideration for a transfer. These communications should make the students feel that they are highly-valued—because they are! The communications could be sent via email and contain information such as research, alumni and professional networking, and scholarship opportunities. The university currently sends similar email communications but this study has offered a more specific group that should be targeted.

Recommendation #2: Help find new ways to academically challenge high-performing students.

As noted, students interviewed indicated that they did not feel academically challenged while at Binghamton University. I propose that the institution take multiple approaches to address this student-identified problem. First, since it is one of the four research universities in the SUNY system, Binghamton University has many research opportunities that already exist for students in various majors or fields. Thus, administrators

could work closely with faculty to more clearly advertise and recruit for these opportunities around campus. Again, these opportunities can be sent through email communications similar to the ones mentioned in recommendation #1.

Second, since these students do not feel engaged in the classroom, the University could conduct workshops for faculty on how to facilitate in-class discussions. For example, the University currently has a program called the Institute for Student-Centered Learning (ISCL) that encourages faculty to make teaching student-focused. The ISCL could incorporate a particular workshop on how to better challenge students academically. Perhaps the University could consider mandating the faculty to attend such events every few semesters. Another suggestion would be to incorporate these types of seminars and workshops into orientations for new faculty. These seminars can be given by fellow professors or hired professionals to educate the institution's faculty on the consequences of students' classroom experiences.

Finally, professors should be encouraged to implement discussion-sparking components into their courses. More specifically, all faculty should be encouraged to teach service-learning courses or field-relevant service components. Such opportunities would provide in-depth, hands-on applications of coursework for students and allow for deeper conversations that go beyond "rudimentary" vocabulary. Students often feel a stronger connection to the class material and their classmates because of their similar experiences in the field. Also, students might begin to perceive professors as more passionate about and connected to their respective fields. These perceptions might make faculty appear more approachable, which would also address concerns identified by some interviewees. These

experiences benefit all parties involved but most importantly provide students with meaningful experiential learning opportunities that can enrich the classroom environment.

Recommendation #3: Take measures to improve Binghamton University for students who decide to stay.

Based on the findings of this study, Binghamton University has little control over that fact that they will lose many students in this demographic to institutions perceived as more prestigious. Since networking has been found to be an important puzzle piece to student satisfaction as indicated in finding #4, I propose that the Binghamton Scholars Program at the University re-evaluate its programs to ensure they are providing Binghamton University's strong academic performers with the best opportunities possible. The Scholars Program could regularly invite graduates of Binghamton University and this specific program to talk with students about their personal experiences as well as potential opportunities available after graduation.

Moreover, all students regardless if they have an index of 90 or above also deserve the best opportunities the institution can provide. Binghamton University remains a young institution with lots of growing room. Focusing on reputation alone can offer a flat and unfulfilling experience for students once they actually arrive. Improving the experience and opportunities that Binghamton University provides all students will naturally increase the reputation of the institution.

Thus, I encourage the institution to begin to bridge the gap between alumni and all current students. Individual departments should be encouraged to invite alumni to speak with students about how their education from Binghamton University has benefited them. Also,

the University Alumni Relations department should consider better promotion of the B-connected database, an online forum where students and alumni can connect. This tactic is three-fold. First, it would give students insight into what kinds of positions they can obtain with their degree. Second, it would increase opportunities to network on an individual basis. Third, it would help alumni remain connected to the university. It is these types of connections that create a continued and undying pride for their alma-mater.

Finally, providing more professional networking opportunities through events such as career and internship fairs as well as general conferences about career path opportunities are helpful to the overall development of students. Eventually, a large web of networks would spread the word about Binghamton University that fosters the evolution of a natural and genuine reputation.

Recommendation #4: Develop evaluations tools for both current students and students who have left the institution.

This study alone does not provide the University with enough information or evidence to address all aspects of the problem. Thus, I suggest that evaluations be implemented for not only current students but those who have left the University. Current students can be surveyed or be asked to participate in focus groups to find out areas of improvement as well as where the University is providing exceptional services. In addition, the University should consider providing optional exit interviews or surveys for all students who have left the institution. Not only could this provide valuable information for administration but it may present a potential opportunity to improve a student's view of the university.

Conclusion

Retaining Binghamton University's strong academic performers will not be an easy or quick task to accomplish; however, the findings and recommendations of this study provide insight on the causes and possible actions that can be taken to begin the process. Other universities—particularly state institutions—may also find this study useful to address similar problems.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Date: March 12, 2012

To: Lauren Wilbur, DPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator
Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval
Protocol Number: 1937-12
Protocol title: *Retaining Binghamton University's Highest Caliber Students*

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an expedited approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.110(7). The Informed Consent document has been approved – for a period of one year – with the following Waivers: 46.116 (4) Waiver alternate treatment, 46.116 (6) Waiver of requiring whether medical treatments are available if injury occurs

An expedited status requires that you will be required to submit a Continuing Review application annually as outlined by Federal Guidelines: *46.109 (e) An IRB shall conduct continuing review of research covered by this policy at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year, and shall have authority to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.*

If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation, using the form listed below: http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/2009_Forms/012_Modification%20Form.rtf

Principal Investigators or any individual involved in the research must report any problems involving the conduct of the study or subject participation. Any problems involving the recruitment and consent processes or any deviations from the approved protocol should be reported in writing within five (5) business days as outlined in Binghamton University – Human Subjects Research Review Office - Policy and procedures IX.F.1 Unanticipated problems/adverse event/complaints. We also require that the following form be submitted. <http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Adverse%20Event%20Form.rtf>

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these

records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the following

form: <http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Protocol%20Closure%20Form.rtf>

Upon notification we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file

Diane Bulizak, Secretary

Human Subjects Research Review Office

Biotechnology Building, Room 2205

85 Murray Hill Rd.

Vestal, NY 13850

dbulizak@binghamton.edu

Telephone: [\(607\) 777-3818](tel:(607)777-3818)

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Appendix B*Request for Participation Email*

Dear [NAME] ,

My name is Lauren Wilbur and I am a graduate student in the Public Administration program at Binghamton University. I am writing to you today to request your assistance in completing a project in conjunction with the Undergraduate Admissions Office. According to the University records, you were considered one of the top students among your entering class. The University seeks to understand why you decided to leave the institution in hopes to better serve students of your quality in the future.

If you would like to share your story through a short 15-20 minute phone interview with me, please respond to this email with your name, email address, phone number, and availability to set up a time to talk. Please know that any information you share will remain confidential.

If you have any initial questions or concerns please feel free to email me at lwilbur1@binghamton.edu.

Your participation will be of great benefit to the University and future students like you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lauren Wilbur
MPA Candidate, '12
Binghamton University
Binghamton, NY 14902

Appendix C

Interview Script

Hi, [Name]. Thank you so much for taking the time to be interviewed for my research. As I have indicated in previous communications, Binghamton University considered you to be a highly sought-after student. BU is interested to know why students like you choose to leave. Your responses will be useful to the University to better serve its most sought after students in the future. Once again I'd like to remind you that this information will be kept confidential and none of your personal information will be revealed to anyone but me. If at any time you wish to stop the interview or do not want to answer a question, please say so.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Do you wish to participate in this interview? ____ YES ____ NO

1. What year did you enter BU?
2. Why did attend BU?
3. Why did you leave Binghamton University?
 - a. If they indicate more than 1 reason- Could you rank these by degree of influence on your decision to leave? 1 being the most important.
4. What, if any, support could BU have provided to you as a freshman that might have changed your decision?
5. Is there anything you would have done differently at BU? It's ok to say that there wasn't anything.
6. Did you transfer to another institution?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Where did you transfer to?
 - ii. Why did you choose this University?
 - iii. What, if any, does University offer something that BU does not?
 - b. If no:
 - i. Do you plan to complete a college degree later on?
 - ii. What kinds of institution are you interested in attending?

Demographic Information:

1. Hometown & State-
2. Major course of study
3. What level of education did your parent(s) complete?
 - a. Less than a High School
 - b. High School
 - c. Some college

- d. Received an Associate's Degree
 - e. Received a Bachelor's Degree
 - f. Other _____
- 4. Race
 - 5. Gender

Appendix D

General Information of Interview Respondents

	Response Count
Gender	
Male	6
Female	6
Race	
Caucasian	9
Asian	3
Binghamton University Entry Year	
2008	7
2009	3
2011	1
Currently Enrolled in Higher Education	
Yes	11
No**	1
Current Institution in Higher Education*	
Broome Community College	1
Cornell University	5
NYU Stern	1
SUNY Geneseo	2
Swarthmore College	1
University of Virginia	1
Major Course of Study*	
Biology	2
English Literature	1
Finance	1
Industrial & Labor Relations	4
Speech Pathology	1
Paramedics	1
Politics, Philosophy, Literature	1
Hometown Region	
Long Island	1
New York City	2
Upstate New York	9

**This student entered the U.S. Military through the MAVNI program that allowed noncitizens to gain citizenship after 4 years of service.

*Response count does not include the single student who left Higher Education system altogether.

Appendix E

Quotes from Participants Related to Each Identified Theme

Theme 1: Binghamton University's location influenced students' decision to attend but for some it also influenced their decision to leave the institution.

Quote 1: "I originally chose Binghamton because it was close to my hometown in New York City. It was much closer than my second choice school in Michigan...but while I was there I become homesick. I was born and raised in New York and the City of Binghamton didn't provide enough for me to explore. I missed the city life"

Quote 2: "Binghamton was close to my hometown, Poughkeepsie, NY. However, BU played as a good stepping stone to Cornell for me; maybe the local environment prepares people for Cornell. There was an ease of transferring."

Quote 3: "I am from Buffalo and the 5.5 hour drive to and from Binghamton was a lot. The distance I was from home made the size of the campus feel much bigger. Geneseo is only a 1.5 hour drive for me now, which I like."

Quote 4: "I chose BU over other schools I was accepted into simply because it was close to Cornell and I planned to transfer there anyway."

Theme 2: Many students received a guaranteed transfer to other institutions.

Quote 1: "[Cornell] gave me a guaranteed transfer...actually now I think they call it a transfer option because you aren't technically guaranteed to get the transfer. You have to, or at least I had to, get a 3.3 GPA my freshman year to get into the Industrial and Labor relations program there. I immediately knew I was going to attend Binghamton as well as leave it."

Quote 2: "I was accepted into all the schools I had applied to, except for Cornell which was my first choice. I had gotten a guaranteed transfer there though as long as I maintained a 3.3 GPA my freshman year."

Quote 3: "I was waitlisted at Geneseo...well...I don't know what they call it but I had the opportunity to transfer to Geneseo in January of my freshman year. I ended up waiting until the next Fall to go but I obviously chose Binghamton for my first year."

Quote 4: "I was 85% positive the second I stepped foot on Binghamton's campus that I was going to be leaving because I was already accepted to Cornell the next year...I actually had a really interesting relationship with a girl that lived across the hall from me...Her first choice was Cornell and she didn't get accepted, not even a guaranteed transfer. I actually ended up

convincing her to reapply to Cornell. She came with me that next fall. We're still really good friends now."

Quote 5: "These are rough numbers but I know of at least 26 people that had a guaranteed transfer to Cornell that I went to BU with. Of that I could list 13 people who actually accepted the offer and transferred."

Quote 6: "I transferred with 15 students from BU to Cornell."

Theme 3: Binghamton University plays a great stepping stone for students.

Quote 1: "BU gave me the opportunity to fulfill a freshman year of college without staying home for an affordable price."

Quote 2: "BU plays as a good stepping stone to Cornell academically."

Quote 3: "Binghamton is put in the unfortunate position of being the best SUNY and thus becomes a stepping stone for Cornell."

Theme 4: These students did not find Binghamton University academically challenging

Quote 1: "I was really disappointed with the academic rigor at BU so I wanted to study abroad in England so I applied to Oxford and transferred there for a year-long visiting student instead of doing an exchange through BU."

Quote 2: "I feel I was a little more intellectually vivacious than my classmates. The professors were teaching, what I considered rudimentary vocabulary for most of the class."

Quote 3: "I felt very unfulfilled in my classes. There were definite moments where I felt that 'I wish this class discussion was more engaged.'"

Quote 4: "Professors didn't seem genuinely interested in the students or that they were passionate about their fields."

Quote 5: "The student body—which I'm sure is common at all schools—but there was a group that didn't care about learning. They just wanted to get the degree."

Quote 6: "I wasn't challenged enough at BU. I had this impression that if I went to Cornell I would have more work and need to challenge myself. Come to find out, I find I have the same amount of homework as my friends that still go to BU. But somehow I still feel more challenged here."

Quote 7: "I think right now all that I have experienced would be that I am experiencing a lot more demand from my professors here [at Geneva]. I'm not sure if that's because I was talking genetics at BU or what."

Quote 8: “I wasn’t academically challenged. I was only putting in 10 hours of work in a week and I felt like I had better opportunities at other schools.”

Quote 9: “I think it [UVA] has a much better social scene for me in terms of talking about things I am interested in like why the stars are the way they are...you know...astronomy and stuff. BU had a social scene but not one where I could continue the conversations from class.”

Theme 5: Other institutions provide better networking opportunities for students.

Quote 1: “My school, School of Labor Relations, has a really strong alumni network. I have a first name basis with people of ages 50-70 that have been incredible mentors for me in my professional life. Maybe BU could connect freshman to alumni. Maybe have them come into the scholars and talk about the great things you can do.”

Quote 2: “UVA is more renowned. BU isn’t very recognized in the medical field. UVA has provided me with more and better opportunities to meet people and get information about grad school.”

Quote 3: “[NYU Stern] is ranked 2 or 3 among business schools. They have good networking. Interviews for jobs are actually done on campus. At BU I had gone to the career fairs and they were only done in months of recruiting or certain times. At NYU the firms’ presence is always there.”

Quote 4: “The alumni network at Cornell is stronger. You are being compared to Harvard students instead of Geneseo students. I guess it’s like if a professional hockey team played a pee-wee team.”

Quote 5: “I actually called up some law firms and asked them if I had a better chance getting a job there if I had a 3.9 from Binghamton or a 3.3 from Cornell. They responded that it depended on how I network. I felt that Cornell had better alumni networking.”

Theme 6: Binghamton University is a great education for An affordable price.

Quote 1: “My Dad was forceful with me about the quality of education I’d get at BU for such a great price.”

Quote 2: “The main reasons I chose Binghamton in the first place were financial reasons. My Dad lost his job in 2004 and I had two older brothers in college. I wanted a good education but I didn’t want to put a huge financial burden on my family.”

Quote 3: “A lot of schools were out of my league financially.”

Quote 4: “I originally got accepted into BU and Ithaca College. I chose BU because it was cheaper and a better school.”

Theme 7: Students' parents play a large role in their decisions about college.

Quote 1: "I was actually going to stay [at BU] up until the last minute. I had already signed a lease in CIW. But my parents told me I was crazy to stay because I got into an Ivy League school. They said 'why would you pass that up?'"

Quote 2: "My Dad was forceful with me about the quality of education I'd get at BU for such a great price."

Quote 3: "I'm from Syracuse; my parents wanted me to stay within an hour radius for at least my first year of college."

Quote 4: "I have a lot of respect for BU but ...I'll blame this on my parents but I had the perception that I needed to go to a more prestigious school."

Theme 8: Students want to earn a degree from a more prestigious institution.

Quote 1: "I had my heart set on getting my degree from an Ivy League."

Quote 2: "Although I say I would re-apply to Binghamton after the military, I really would like to aim a little higher if I get accepted elsewhere." (NOTE: This student entered the U.S. Military through the MAVNI program that allowed noncitizens to gain citizenship after 4 years of service.)

Quote 3: "Yeah Binghamton is a great school but I wouldn't have been satisfied unless I transferred to a more prestigious school."

Theme 9: Despite the fact that they left, many students still think fondly of Binghamton University

Quote 1: "I made a lot of effort to make friends and get involved. I still go back to visit every 2 or 3 months. SUNY Binghamton is a name I have come to truly respect BU since I am from Syracuse and I think it's a great institution. Honestly, if I have enough money when I am older I would still donate to BU."

Quote 2: "I had a really great freshman year. I still go back to visit my friends. It also helps that I am from Binghamton."

Quote 3: "When I am out of the military I will definitely consider re-applying to Binghamton University."

Quote 4: “Looking back, I really did enjoy my time there. I’m just more of a city girl I guess.”

Quote 5: “I learned a lot and the professors were interesting. It just wasn’t the right fit for me.”